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AUTHOR	Luther, Vicki; Wall, Milan
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ABSTRACT

This booklet is written from the perspective that small towns can survive in changing times with the right leadership. It is intended for use by educators involved with community development or by extension educators. The attitudes and behaviors of leaders are key factors that will help communities cope with change. No longer will a town survive simply because it is located next to a major highway or close to a larger city. The seven secrets are: (1) positive attitude that views change as a challenge to the community's abilities to innovate and to survive; (2) entrepreneurial spirit with which the community is willing to take risks and to work together in learning from failures and successes; (3) a "bias for action" by which people act to change their community, rather than waiting for others to tell them what to do; (4) focus on controllable factors, rather than worrying about forces outside of community control; (5) planning for development rather than "drifting toward an uncertain future"; (6) strategic outlook in searching opportunities where others see threats; and (7) vision for the future that helps community articulate what the community is to be like in 5, 10, or even 25 years. (ALL)

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7 secrets to coping with change in small towns

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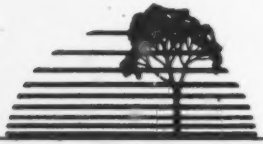

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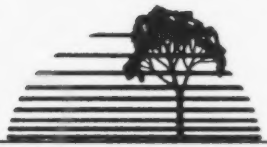
By
Milan Wall and
Vicki Luther, Ed.D.



Heartland Center for Leadership Development

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About the Seven Secrets

These Seven Secrets are drawn from the experience of several years of immersion into the challenges facing small towns and rural communities, as they struggle to overcome the uncertainties caused by a fickle world economy and the continuing depopulation of America's countryside.

Obviously, these are not "secrets" in the sense that no one else knows about them. But they do represent an important perspective that gets relatively little attention, despite overwhelming evidence that small towns with the right leadership can survive... even in times like these.

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Positive Attitude

SECRET 1

Conventional wisdom says that a small town has to be located within a few miles of a major highway or close to significant natural resources or a large city, or be larger than a certain size, or have some other "characteristic of circumstance" to provide any hope for survival.

Now, however, conventional wisdom is being replaced by a far more useful, up-to-date perspective. Research conducted by the Heartland Center for Leadership Development and recent studies by the National Governors Association demonstrates that leadership is more important than location, that community attitude is more important than community size.

> ***The attitude of people in leadership may be the most important quality of those communities that view change as a challenge to their abilities to innovate and to survive.***

In the thriving small towns studied by the Heartland Center, leaders are ready and willing to take on the challenges associated with community development.

SECRET 2 Entrepreneurial Spirit

Communities that are good at surviving are successful entrepreneurs, in much the same way that surviving businesses are entrepreneurs.

> ***The community must be willing to take risks, and the public and private sectors have to work together, learning from failures and successes alike.***

In healthy small towns, leaders are willing and creative risk takers, learning from their failures as well as their successes. Public and private sectors work together for the community's future, using new and innovative public-private partnerships that build on entrepreneurial strengths and create entrepreneurial successes.

In these communities, support for maintaining current businesses and developing new ones is evident, and no one believes that simply recruiting industry is the hope for the future.

Bias for Action

SECRET 3

Communities that are coping successfully with change are communities with a bias for action, where citizens don't just talk about doing something new or trying something different.

They are communities of problem-solvers, where creative energy is evident in ongoing community programs and new community projects. Here, leadership assumes the chief responsibility for the community's future viability. In these communities, leaders are clever enough to pick new projects that have a realistic chance for success, that will have a significant enough impact to be felt if they succeed, and that will not devastate the community if they don't work.

> ***In viable communities, people are not waiting for someone else to tell them what to do.***

In viable communities, people are not waiting for someone else to tell them what to do, and they don't blame others for their own inaction.

SECRET 4 Focus on Controllables

Communities that are surviving in challenging times are communities that are smart enough to focus on what they can control, rather than worrying about all the forces outside of their control.

They don't waste time fretting about all the problems that they can't do anything about or talking only about the forces they really can't influence.

Communities must focus on what they can control, not on factors outside their control, such as location.

In these communities, leaders are good not only at exploiting community strengths, they are also realistic about community weaknesses. They are willing to take steps to minimize the negative impacts of those weaknesses on their future survival.

Plan for Development

SECRET 5

Surviving communities are not just "drifting toward an uncertain future," but rather they are taking deliberate steps to plan for the development of their towns, schools, and businesses.

By working together to write down a plan for development, communities can take hold of their own futures and then carry out their plans with specific blueprints for towns, schools, businesses.

In these communities, leaders understand the importance of engaging in active planning as a community, with lots of participation in the development of specific blueprints for action, specifying who does what, when, and what is expected to happen as a result.

Development plans must be flexible enough to respond to changing conditions. Leaders need to have a strategy in place that enables them to respond quickly to new opportunities.

SECRET 6 Strategic Outlook

Towns that are coping with change are towns with an obvious strategic outlook on their situation and what they can do about it. They are insightful enough to find opportunities where others may only see threats, and they are clever enough to match those opportunities with their own strengths.

Communities must be insightful enough to find opportunities where others see threats... to put their competitive advantages forward.

Leaders in healthy communities believe that their towns can take charge of their futures through a realistic, yet hopeful perspective... one in which they think of their towns in much the way a business owner thinks of marketing a product or service.

A community needs to become aware of its own competitive situation, and it needs to learn to take steps that put its competitive advantages forward.

Vision for the Future

SECRET 7

A community that tackles change head on and wins is a community that has a vision for the future. It has leaders who are good at helping the community articulate what residents want the community to be like in 5, 10 or even 25 years.

> ***Communities need to be able to answer the community development equivalent of the key question in private enterprise: 'What business are we in?'***

As a community, the town coping with change is able to find sufficient consensus to not only articulate the vision, but also to make it understandable, so that everyone has a chance to support it.

Communities coping with change find ways to take what is unique about them and then translate that uniqueness into a vision that encourages and motivates citizens to work harder on their community's behalf.

Hope for the Future

The attitudes and behaviors of leaders are key among the factors that will help communities cope with change in these times. No longer will a town survive simply because it is located next to the major highway or close to the larger city, nor will these "industrial age" assumptions save the community whose leadership is not ready to take charge.

What the Heartland Center has been learning about community leadership implies a strong message of hope for small towns, since community attitude (however inflexible it may seem) is still easier to change than community location!

The message for today's leaders is this: You can't move your town to a different location; you can move your town's attitude in a different direction.

About the Heartland Center

The Heartland Center for Leadership Development is an independent, nonprofit corporation engaged in a variety of activities designed to help recognized and emerging leaders approach confidently the challenges associated with fundamental change.

The Heartland Center was organized by a group of Great Plains leaders as an outgrowth of the Visions from the Heartland, a grassroots futures project. The Center is known nationally for its innovative research on rural leadership and especially for its study on "Clues to Rural Community Survival."

Publications Available for Order

Please use the attached form when ordering. Pre-paid orders at the prices listed. Orders billed will include an additional $1.00 handling charge per item. Prices include applicable sales taxes. Prices subject to change without prior notice.

ORDER FORM

Indicate number of copies of each report requested.

- ❑ Clues to Rural Commmunity Survival $10.00
- ❑ Schools as Entrepreneurs: Helping Small Towns Survive $5.00
- ❑ The Entrepreneurial Community (New Edition) $21.50
- ❑ Seven Secrets to Coping With Change $2.50
- ❑ Ten Ideas for Recruiting New Leaders $2.50
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